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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001431

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT BRIEFS AMBASSADOR

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter; reasons 1.5(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) Summary: Ambassador Jeter paid a courtesy call on Secretary to Government for the Federation (SGF) Ufot Ekaette

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on June 15. Ekaette described the role of the SGF in civilian government as a cross between Chief of Staff and "super-Minister." In a meeting that ranged widely over topics of current interest in bilateral relations, the SGF proved to have a firm command of the issues. He offered his assistance to the Ambassador if ever USG officials encountered difficulty getting a directive from the President translated into action by the Ministries, a common problem. As proof of his willingness to help, Ekaette concluded the meeting by asking to be included in correspondence from the Embassy to the Ministries of Aviation and Internal Affairs regarding re-deploying INS officials to train airline employees and GON officers in identifying and interdicting fraudulent documents. End Summary.

¶2. (U) SGF Ekaette described for the Ambassador the role of his office within Nigeria's new democratic dispensation. Under military rule, the SGF normally acted as Head of the civil service, but this function has been separated since the return of democracy. Ekaette said that the SGF sits as Secretary on all Executive Councils: Council of State,

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Federal Executive Council, and Security Council. He said that all action items produced by Ministries are routed through his office, and if he disagrees with them on policy, budgetary or administrative grounds, they are sent back for reconsideration. Ekaette added that the President, when dissatisfied with solutions proposed by the Council of State, will ask the SGF to chair a committee of Ministers to work on an alternative.

¶3. (C) The SGF has six Permanent Secretaries on his staff, and is in charge of a number of Ministers of State working directly in the President's office, including Political, Economic and Administrative Affairs. (Comment: Protocol hierarchy is both very sensitive and unsettled within the GON: practically speaking, Ministers follow the Speaker of the House, after the Senate President and Vice President. The SGF appears to hold a practical rank equivalent to that of Minister, while appearing to be primus inter pares in terms of his influence and co-ordinating role between the Presidency and Ministries. End Comment.) Ekaette denied having a direct supervisory role over the Head of Service or Ministers, yet his influence is perhaps indicated by the fact that he announced the sacking of several ministers in a surprise move last week. The SGF offered to assist if ever there appears to be a "logjam" in getting something accomplished through Ministerial channels. "I break through," he said.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador asked Ekaette, an indigene of Akwa Ibom, his position on Niger Delta issues. The SGF replied that there would likely be a political solution to the problem despite the current litigation in the Supreme Court. "The President's mandate is national--he must balance the demands of individual states with the demands of the whole." On the state of the Civil Service, Ekaette said he felt the GON had adequately dealt with the issue of ghost workers, although some may remain. He estimated the total number of GON employees, including the military and police, to be 247,000. The SGF was equally conversant in other topics raised by the Ambassador, including the Anti-Corruption Commission, AGOA, and rule of law/sanctity of contract issues. On the latter, the SGF said it was unfortunate to unilaterally nullify contracts, but he defended the practice when the contracts in question are "fictitious." He said that the current Government inherited a large number of contracts which existed only to the extent that the "mobilization fee" (roughly 50 percent of the contract's value) was paid, but no work was ever done.

¶5. (C) Finally, the Ambassador raised the problems

surrounding the use of fraudulent documentation by passengers on the South African Air/ Nigerian Airways flight from Lagos to New York. Ambassador Jeter described his efforts with Kema Chikwe, Minister of Aviation, and Sunday Afolabi, Minister of Internal Affairs, to promptly reach agreement regarding the return of INS officials to Nigeria to assist in training Nigerian and South African airline employees and possibly GON officials in identifying fraudulent documents. Ekaette asked to be included in the communication regarding this issue, and promised to assist, if needed.

16. (C) Comment: Ekaette may prove to be a vital link that the Mission has lacked in persuading Ministries to translate verbal commitments into action. Where an action requires more than the assent of one minister, such as the USD 3.5 million dollar payment to MPRI, GON officials seem content to kick the ball but never reach the goal line. As for the SGF's real influence, after walking us down to the car, Hakeem Baba-Ahmed, and impressive Permanent Secretary who was recently at the Ministry of Commerce, shook his head and said that the SGF was being modest. "He can make Ministers do things." We will see. End Comment.

Jeter